2 Social media and deaf empowerment

The Polish deaf communities' online fight for representation

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Social media brought change in the communicational, cultural and social practices of many internet users including marginalised and minority groups – for some acting as a great emancipatory force, for others as another frontier filled with disabling features. In this chapter, I explore the profound impact of social media on the Polish deaf community, with a special focus on two aspects. The first one concerns the welcoming milieu for the alternative public space for the deaf – one that gives space for debate outside the majority/hearing domain as well as outside the official deaf agenda. The second is the possibility of mainstreaming the deaf cause with the skillful usage of the social media viral mode of communication. I will start, however, with a brief introduction to the history of the Polish deaf organisation model that will shed some light on how electronic media (not only social ones but so-called Web 1.0 as well) dramatically reshaped the deaf community, making grass-roots initiatives not only successful but possible in the first place.

One state, one party, one deaf organisation

Before World War 2 (WW2), deaf communities in Poland developed in parallel to those in other parts of Europe and the United States. There were a great number of diverse deaf associations including Christian, Jewish and others based around sport and charity. Most were run by deaf people.

The situation changed after WW2 when the communist party came to power. Centralisation became the determining factor of the new economic and social order. Grass-roots initiatives seemed suspicious and potentially threatening to the ruling party, which governed every aspect of public life. All local, minority, cultural and social (not to mention political) institutions became victims of the 'one nation, one state, one viewpoint' perspective. The variety of local deaf organisations was reduced to one official, centralised Polish Association of the Deaf (Polski Związek Głuchych – PZG) which had a typical hierarchy consisting of a directorate in the capital city and a multitude of local branches. The same idea of one organisation for each social group was also applied to blind people and ethnic and national minorities, but whereas the latter were managed by representatives of these groups, associations for deaf and blind people were governed by the hearing and seeing authorities. Both deaf and blind people were regarded as not

only physically but also socially impaired, and were deemed not able to govern their own associations. The PZG served as a charity and an educational institution which set up cooperatives that were granted tax reductions in exchange for hiring deaf people as unqualified workers. The PZG also promoted and taught signed Polish (a signing system invented and developed by hearing linguists) instead of Polish Sign Language, which is the native language of Polish deaf people. This created a situation in which the deaf, banned from setting up their own, independent organisations, were turned into passive beneficiaries of state support.

Due to the iron curtain, the Polish deaf did not experience or benefit from the social movements and changes that took place in the twentieth century in the West, especially in the United States. The gaining of respect and representation, the recognition of sign language (Stokoe 1960; Caterline & Cronenberg 1965), social protests (for example the Deaf President Now! campaign at Gallaudet University in 1988) and the expressions of cultural individuality by deaf communities were all components of the gradual process of 'Western' deaf emancipation; an emancipation that did not take place in Poland until the late 1990s. After the fall of communism in 1989, Poland's borders opened to people and ideas, including new perspectives on deafness and on deaf people's role in society. The vision of Deaf World (the concept of a unique, social Deaf realm) and of deaf cultural separateness and self-determination that had slowly evolved for more than half of the century in the West appeared in Poland as a ready-made set of ideas and attitudes. These concepts and social processes were also closely related to the development of analogue technologies – movies, videos (Bauman, Nelson & Rose, 2006; Peters, 2000), the TTY (Lang, 2000) and captions. Changes in the Polish deaf community started in the late 1990s and converged with the appearance of new media that was quickly followed by a shift from the analogue to digital.

Web 1.0 – the emergence of an alternative public sphere

Jürgen Habermas (1999, 2008) perceived the public sphere as an ideal discoursive milieu of consensus achieved by representation of all actors and their willingness to negotiate. The free exchange and criticism of ideas, concepts and values are the core elements of the Habermasian public sphere. However, they need several prerequisites – common access to the discoursive sphere, representation of the Other and the goodwill of all participants.

Outside the idealistic Habermasian concept, the accessibility of the physical public sphere is limited by physical obstructions, whereas the public sphere distributed through press, radio and television is ruled by audience ratings and advertising. Therefore, minorities (which in Poland constitute a very small percentage of society) are not considered to be a significant audience group, especially in terms of commercial media. In public media, governed by its mission to provide information, entertainment and representation to the whole spectrum of society, it is slightly easier to find content designed for the ethnic and national minority audiences, but still the coverage of minority needs are far from sufficient. Disabled people are hardly ever considered a distinct audience group and media is even

less accessible for many deaf Poles as their native language is not the same as the national one. Many deaf Poles do not comprehend the Polish language well enough to freely participate in the media sphere, follow captions on television (if there are any) or read the press. This excludes them from active as well as passive participation in the public sphere. The deaf who lack both access and a common communication mode are sorely unrepresented and become the marginalised Other. The internet has the capability to serve as an alternative public sphere to those who suffer lack of access to the mainstream public sphere, namely minority groups, including the disabled and the deaf.

The internet, which is not free of barriers and disables many users (Ellis & Kent, 2011), provided new opportunities for the deaf in terms of participation and access to information, albeit for users whose language skills allow them to read in Polish. It enabled the first stage of an alternative deaf public sphere – representing the deaf community online in the same mainstream domain as the hearing majority. The official deaf organisations which were based offline were the first to transfer to the internet and form 'communities online' (Kozinets, 2010, pp. 13–15) which mirror the landscape of the offline deaf community. However, communities originating online (Kozinets's 'online communities') soon started to emerge and had a new, bottom-up quality. These formed the second stage of the online alternative public sphere – grass-roots, unofficial collectives that proposed views alternate, not only to the hearing majority, but also to the dominant discourse of deaf organisations which are run by the hearing and hard of hearing authorities, and consequently represent a medical attitude toward deaf and deafness. I will briefly describe two online platforms designed for deaf users that have played an important role in the evolution of the online deaf community.

The first one is the Association of Deaf and Hard of Hearing Internet Users (Organizacja Niesłyszących i Słabosłyszących Internautów – ONSI). They run onsi.pl, a typical variety portal which offers a wide range of information, from politics and economy, through to culture and trivia. Its main role is to filter internet content to find, translate and publish information that may be of interest to the Polish deaf. In 2008 the platform expanded its offerings by launching onsi.tv, the first news service in Polish Sign Language. While this is far from a professional news service, it plays an important, if auxiliary, role by providing narratives in sign language that serve as the basis of its recognition and unification. Sign language's usage in a context wider than interpersonal communication builds its importance and makes it a tool for self-recognition. Also, its use in movies causes it to develop in the same way that writing influences oral cultures. The role of analogue technologies of moving pictures and video for Western sign languages (most profoundly for American Sign Language [Krentz, as cited in Bauman, Nelson & Rose, 2006, p. 51–70]) in Poland was taken over by internet video files posted on YouTube and distributed via Facebook.

There is no formal organisation behind the second platform, glusi.pl; instead it is run by a group of enthusiasts. Glusi.pl was one of the first deaf platforms in Poland to make extensive use of YouTube. Volunteers translate videos concerning deaf issues, but what is more interesting is that glusi.pl has two versions – one in

written Polish, another in Polish Sign Language, which includes a signed forum. The idea seemed brilliant at first as it allowed users to express themselves in their native language, thereby creating a totally separate discursive sphere for the deaf. This initiative, however, was surprisingly unsuccessful – only a few films were uploaded by users and most of them are singular statements, tales or jokes that do not engage one another or constitute real discussion.

There are two reasons for the signed forum failure. First, when it was launched, the signed forum was an island of Polish Sign Language in an ocean of written Polish. For those deaf people who have significant problems with comprehension of the Polish language, the forum might have been hard to find. The second reason for its failure was the appearance of YouTube and Facebook, establishing a perfect communication milieu for deaf people, with the first serving as a publication platform and the latter as a powerful distribution tool.

Web 2.0 – between networking and the filter bubble

The social media boom in Poland started in the mid-2000s, with grono.net (launched in 2004) or nasza-klasa.pl (launched in 2006) as local answers to the global phenomenon of social media sites. But in 2009–2010 the landscape of Polish social media was shaped by just two sites – Facebook and YouTube. Facebook became extremely popular in 2009 after the Polish language version of the platform appeared in 2008 (Rusza polska wersja Facebooka, 2008). YouTube's popularity among Polish internet users consequently rose from 23% in 2006, to 61% in 2010 and to 67% in 2013 (www.gemius.pl).

At that time the main internet platforms for deaf people were still web 1.0 sites, with the powerful deaf.pl forum serving as an online agora and counterweight to the offline domination of the pathologised vision of deafness. deaf.pl (a forum associated with the aforementioned onsi.pl) was created in 2004 and attracted deaf users who were the 'proud deaf', meaning they identified themselves with a cultural attitude towards deafness which contrasted with the aforementioned PZG. As one of the few Deaf Culture asylums, the forum soon became a rather extremist and unfriendly environment for the hard of hearing and deaf people that do not use Polish Sign Language, leading to a drop off in users. Painful as this was, it created a coherent and highly motivated group of Deaf people who were eager and ready to take up offline action. For them the idea of Deaf Culture was not an extravagant Western fad but a shared value that was worth putting into social and political practice.

Before the hyper popularity of social media in Poland, Facebook was used rather instrumentally by Web 1.0 platforms, serving as a tool for visualising the community gathered around sites such as głusi.pl and onsi.pl. As these sites did not have many other instruments with which to create a sense of belonging for their participants, they employed the graphic capabilities of their Facebook fan pages to showcase photos of users and the quantity of 'likes' their organisations received. At onsi.pl there was information showing the number of views of each article, and the deaf.pl forum provided statistics. In both cases, information was anonymous

and strictly quantitative, but it gave users a sense of participating in a bigger group of (presumably) deaf users. The software simply counted and displayed the number of times each page had been viewed. The display of the number of likes on Facebook together with fans' photos presents something more – it counts people who have deliberately clicked the 'like' button and identify with the set of ideas and values regarding deafness, as well as the model of the deaf person represented by the site and consequently by its Facebook profile. Otherwise, the popularity of onsi.pl's Facebook fan page is difficult to explain as it does not offer much – no stimuli in the form of additional information, questions or moderating discussions. The content is self-referential and consists of links to articles and videos published on onsi.pl and onsi.tv. The much smaller and less organised group behind glusi.pl had to try much harder to gain an equal number of fans of their Facebook fan page.

The deaf media landscape changed after deaf users combined YouTube as an expression tool for sign communication, and Facebook as a distribution and discursive instrument. After this fusion, the fate of Web 1.0 sites was sealed. They demand a high level of Polish language comprehension as everything is written, which results in a paradoxical stratification – the most active members who praise and fight for Polish Sign Language are those who are the most fluent in Polish. The vast majority of deaf.pl users are in fact passive readers. On one hand, this is typical of online participation. Prosumerism, so praised by the first researchers of social media (e.g. Tapscott & Williams, 2010), turned out to be more optimistic than realistic. Counter to expectations and enthusiastic predictions, most internet users participate passively more than by actually creating content.[1] On the other hand, when reading deaf.pl threads intended for everybody to express themselves (e.g. who is who or the dating section) it can be clearly seen that the users who do not post regularly have great difficulties with the Polish language and in fact are on the verge of illiteracy. For them, the YouTube–Facebook combination was a liberating communication environment. The two work in tandem – YouTube allows signing, and Facebook offers a variety of non-verbal communication possibilities such as liking, sharing and commenting with easily posted gifs, memes, images and links to YouTube videos. The dynamics of Facebook encourage uncomplicated, short statements followed by icons displaying mood, physical location or the activity the user is undertaking. All this makes Facebook far more welcoming to deaf people who do not know verbal language than any Web 1.0 platform.

In 2013 the deaf.pl forum started to die off, while deaf groups on Facebook were mushrooming. The deaf.pl community was aware of this fact and accurately pointed out that Facebook was the source of the forum's rapid popularity decrease. On 27 February 2014, a special thread was created which was devoted to the forum's decline due to Facebook. As a remedy, pasting Facebook's deaf-related content into deaf.pl was proposed. The idea of cataloguing Facebook's content was suggested not only as a tactic for the revival of deaf.pl, but also as a means of addressing what some users experienced as Facebook's overwhelming and chaotic interface. Facebook communication is rapid, intensified by the practice of frequent status updating, which is much easier than writing long and complex forum posts. At the same time, the multitude of posts, status changes and replies to posts often

make it impossible to follow. This is especially true in the case of very large groups and fan pages where the number of comments is so large that debate is practically impossible. The perceivable elements of the communication are the flows and changes in direction of discussions, rather than single comments that are easily overlooked and eventually hidden, as Facebook's structure shows only the most recent comments.

Apart from the confusing overabundance of constantly updated content, Facebook has another paradoxical feature – although the platform creates an ideal environment for representing diversity (creating multiple groups and fan pages which gather people around ideas and concepts that are hard to promote and distribute otherwise) it also makes it extremely difficult to engage in substantive discussion of different viewpoints. On the deaf.pl forum, the deaf used to discuss, negotiate and often argue within one space, all organised in a neat and ordered thematic structure – here the practice of meeting and exchanging viewpoints was the basis of the public sphere concept. The deaf community is highly heterogeneous with regards to age, gender, education, social background and, most importantly, in terms of deafness and deaf identity. This diversity caused friction in the forum, which led to conflicts and schisms. Although deaf.pl needed strict regulations by moderators, it was still one common discursive space.

On Facebook, different deaf factions have formed their own groups – the Deaf Unity Front (Polityka Jedności Głuchych) and the Social Movement of the Deaf and Their Friends (Społeczny Ruch Głuchych i Ich Przyjaciół) or anti-PZG (PPZG) seem the most influential and antagonist ones. Most of them require acceptance of new members by administrators, are isolated from each other, and act as cliques. Cooperation and the exchange of ideas is rather difficult because this separatism reinforces the 'filter bubble effect' (Pariser, 2012) which is a consequence of new media variability (Manovich, 2001). Variability may be understood in two ways – as the ability of new media objects to adjust to different types of equipment (e.g. web browsers or mobile devices), and as content being adjusted to the user's interests, preferences and browsing history. Content is personalised to protect the user from unwanted information, but at the same time it creates a 'you loop' (Pariser, 2012) in which the user's point of view is constantly reassured. One's worldview is not challenged due to the established practices designed to provide users with content tailored to their perceived interests, tastes and points of view. The division of the Polish Facebook deaf community into numerous, separate groups does not promote social networking – on the contrary it deepens the lack of contact, making it harder to encounter the Other who might challenge what we regard as obvious.

Although the deaf community seems more dispersed and divided on Facebook than it used to be on deaf.pl, it is easier to organise offline events in social media than it was several years earlier on deaf.pl. The deaf community has changed, gaining self-consciousness and social skills since 2010. On 14 May of that year members of the deaf.pl forum took their first offline action by manifesting their discontent of the lack of captions in front of the Polish public television building. The protest originated in February on the forum and ended in June, when the last of many highly critical posts regarding the manifestation appeared. This was the first

grass-roots event of this scale organised by the deaf community, during which the deaf made a clear statement of their cause. Unfortunately, the protest was judged as unsuccessful mainly due to the poor attendance. However, the organisation of the event provided real experience in both the managing of a social action (e.g. contact with media) and active participation in public life.

One of the most memorable events of the Facebook era was the founding of an alternative to the official PZG. In 2013, the Social Movement of the Deaf and Their Friends was inaugurated. The Movement's online home was launched in in April 2013 at g.klyo.net, and served as a publication forum for YouTube videos uploaded by the group's leaders. At first the site made it possible to collect videos uploaded by different people into one place. This reflected the lack of trust in social media platforms as mechanisms for focusing the concerns and conversations of deaf people. As an 'official' site, g.klyo.net was still perceived as something more accurate than a YouTube profile. The first videos are no longer available, but their titles (*Heading toward reform: the Deaf fighting for their rights,* or *Spring is coming: time to build deaf power*) clearly portray the movement's objectives of both recognition, and social and organisational change. The number of posts per month declined after the Movement was officially registered in December 2013 and the Facebook profile appeared in January 2014.

It is interesting that when the move occurred from g.klyo.net to Facebook, the logo of the Movement was changed from two hands signing to two clenched fists – from communication to fight. The new logo accurately reflects the Movement's attitudes and targets – social and political change regarding services and welfare for the deaf and profound opposition to the PZG, the organisation blamed for almost all the negligence, bad organisation, mismanagement and discrimination that the deaf community suffers. The dissatisfaction with PZG was (and still is) a powerful impetus to the Movement whose unofficial name, anti-PZG, underscores PZG's role as a unity-building enemy.

In February 2014, the biggest (and second in the short history of the organisation) protest against the PZG was held – the deaf organised a march through the streets of capital city with its climax in front of the PZG building. Marching, protesting and occupation are a form of gaining attention in order to voice expectations or demands towards the other side of the conflict; however, collective presence in the same physical space works for the protesters themselves as well, it is a tool which displays the size of the groups. As I have mentioned before, Facebook was used to achieve the same effect by Web 1.0 sites but, as Eric Kluitenberg argues, social media lets people know how many similarly thinking people are out there, as well as revealing their identities (Kluitenberg, 2011, pp. 7–8). Taking into consideration all the critics of the digital dualism (Jurgenson, 2009, 2011a, 2011b, 2012) there is a difference between so-called cyberactivism and offline actions, such as marching and temporarily occupying physical space – just like the Arab Spring or the Twitter-originated #occupywallstreet. Social media does not release users from their social roles and images, on the contrary it highlights them with the timeline, the list of liked pages and groups and eventually with their social locus by revealing their friends, workplace or location, accordingly to what

Manuael Castells calls 'mass self-communication' (Castells, 2009). Co-presence in a physical (urban) space allows a group of individuals, whose biographies and preferences are not revealed, to transform into a crowd, and eventually into a public or political entity. Meeting outside social media results not in individual, social roles but in public ones driven by one cause, and allows people to act as a citizen or a social movement's member.

The demonstration by the Movement was based around Facebook, which served as a powerful information board and navigation centre. Organisers maintained the high level of emotions every day by uploading a daily countdown to the demonstration on the Facebook page, as well as documents such as the official permission for the demonstration, its route and the set of postulates. Information was published numerous times both in Polish and Polish Sign Language. While its online origin makes this deaf demonstration similar to #occupy and the Arab Spring (in its own scale), the usage of social media in preparing the offline action makes the deaf demonstration strikingly different. Even though the Arab Spring and #occupy were pronounced as cyber revolutions, they were far from that – in those instances social media was not used extensively due to the fact that it is an extremely easy object of surveillance. The Polish deaf could use both Facebook and YouTube as their gathering was legal.

This legality of the protest allowed both actors of the conflict – protesters and PZG – to use social media as a communication tool before the demonstration took place. PZG made use of the unofficial communication strategies used in the social media by the deaf community. The vibrant Polish deaf community expresses quite a lot of aggression and hostility online – communication is often highly emotional and quarrels are quick to escalate. On the deaf.pl forum the discussions were strictly moderated and all manifestations of aggression and vulgarity were noticed and deleted, with persistent offenders eventually being banned. Even though allegations of censorship were voiced, the forum was a sphere of calm, factual discussions, even if the peace was constrained.

Some Facebook groups and fan pages are moderated, but on individual walls or unmoderated pages, personal, highly offensive quarrels often take place not only in written Polish (as on deaf.pl), but also in Polish Sign Language through YouTube videos, which seems to make the communication even stronger, as on YouTube the author's face is clearly visible and recognisable, as opposed to written messages on deaf.pl. As users involved in the rows do not belong to the same groups and fan pages, and are not Facebook friends, their quarrels have to rely on the social media viral mode of spreading the content. The harsh discussions are conducted by properly addressing the YouTube videos (that are later shared in Facebook groups) to the intended recipients, e.g. 'To [name and surname]', 'Answer to [name and surname]'. The 'share' function combined with networking does the rest in delivering the video to the right person even if he/she is not in the circle of friends of the sender of the message.

This method of individual communication between conflicting parties was used by the Movement and PZG just before the demonstration, information exchange took place online through YouTube. The PZG authorities addressed the organisers

in a series of YouTube videos (with comments disabled) that were later distributed among Facebook users. Previously, the PZG YouTube channel, which was founded in March 2013, was filled with videos covering official statements, legal issues and trivia. One month before the demonstration, the PZG channel became more intense, starting with an 'open letter' to all deaf organisations supporting the event. In 2014 YouTube became an official medium of communication between PZG and the demonstration organisers. As PZG were the common enemy, they had to adapt to the unofficial mode of communication of the Movement in order to at least try to stop it from organising the demonstration.

Three weeks before the demonstration, morale-building posters appeared on the Facebook page. Similarly to the famous #occupy call to action poster with a ballerina dancing on the Wall Street bull, the deaf posters remodelled the mental environment of the deaf, as Kalle Lasn put it in the case of the #occupy poster (White & Lasn, 2011). The posters and memes used by the organisers made extensive national references, including the national flag, the shape of Poland and the national colours (white and red). A local symbol was used as well, the Warsaw mermaid, the symbol of the capital city, a woman with a raised sword with 'PJM' (the abbreviation for Polish Sign Language) on her shield.

The Movement's Facebook page was stimulated by the demonstration for a long time. Administrators gave detailed information about all media coverage and uploaded video material whenever possible. However, the demonstration and the Movement did not gain much media attention in contrast to the famous Deaf President Now! protest at Gallaudet University in 1988, which attracted the nationwide media to deaf issues. In Poland the protest did not resonate to this extent; however, it caught the attention of the left wing politicians of the progressive Your Movement (Twój Ruch). The party appeared on the Polish political scene in 2011 with great and unexpected (for a conservative Poland) success. Strongly anti-clerical while supporting woman rights, LGTB groups and transgender people, the party presented itself as a supporter of the excluded. Deaf people struggling for emancipation and standing up against powerful institutions caught Your Movement's attention, especially in 2014, when it had already lost its freshness and the image of uncompromising young politicians. Your Movement's interest in the deaf cause was short and fruitless, but it remains as one of the most visible public consequences of the demonstration.

Mainstreaming the deaf cause

The second feature of social media in respect to minority/excluded groups that I want to mention is the 'boomerang effect'. This is the process of strengthening a minority's voice and increasing its influence on the majority of society. This is done by the institutions mobilised to support the expectations, interests or aspirations of the minority, which is a weaker party on the social scene. The result is the multiplexing of the minority and the balancing of the initial unequal state (Porębski, 2010, pp. 44–48). All this may be achieved with the support of NGOs, the government, political institutions and the media. The same effect can be

stimulated by the skillful usage of the mainstream online communication channels in order to gain the interest of the majority/mainstream media. The viral interest of users often attracts media researchers to minority issues. Even though social media platforms are divided into groups and circles of interest, they are in the public sphere, where the content of deaf users can be exposed to the hearing majority's eyes. Social media comes to the rescue of the traditional media as press and television follow the infotainment pattern and struggle with the difficulties of constant news production. Both television and press in Poland extensively leverage user-generated content as a source of information, media drama and lighter topics. All this creates quite a favourable milieu for the deaf message getting through to public opinion.

Surprisingly, the boomerang effect of deaf issues in traditional Polish mainstream media was not achieved by the deaf demonstrating against the PZG (which seems an ideal topic for long-term media interest), but by a group of pupils at a school for the deaf. They formed a performing group called Young Sign Music (Młodzi Migają Muzykę – MMM) after a workshop in 2012 at which they translated popular Polish songs into Polish Sign Language and made videos. The results of the workshop (signed songs and backstage materials) were uploaded on YouTube with the first video appearing in March 2013. The group appeared on the platform as a fully formed phenomenon with a name, logo and Facebook profile (created in February 2013). The sequence of events suggests that the idea of forming a recognisable 'brand' was intended from the beginning and social media was used to gain popularity and attention. The first video uploaded on YouTube (and shared on Facebook) was a short presentation from an existing group in which its members sign and a Polish transcription is presented on the screen, which was a real rarity for videos uploaded online by the Polish deaf. Even onsi.tv does not have captions, which excludes both the hearing and the deaf who do not know Polish Sign Language.

The first videos with signed translations of songs were a rather modest success, but a brilliant PR move had been undertaken. In October 2013, Polish Humanitarian Action (PAH), the most recognised Polish charity organisation, celebrated its twentieth anniversary and several Polish artists recorded a song together to promote and celebrate the anniversary. MMM decided to translate the song into Polish Sign Language and present it at a meeting with Janina Ochojska, the founder and leader of PAH. They recorded and uploaded the song translation to YouTube, where it spread virally with the extensive help of the PAH Facebook page as well as the fan pages of the artists who performed the original song. This attracted media attention to MMM, and, on 25 December, a news item about MMM was broadcast on one of the largest public television news services. The group's decision to join the celebration of PAH brought it to the attention of the public media and made a perfect, heart-warming Christmas story of young, creative people who overcame their disability. It was also a curiosity story, a 'wonder of humanity' tale, in which deafness combined with music made a miracle paradox that worked extremely well for audiences gathered at home and watching the news during the Christmas break (for a critique of these stories see Haller and Preston, Chapter 4 this volume).

Two months later, the Polish pop band Video invited MMM to join them and take part in a video promoting their single (consequently the band gained not only media interest but also a nomination for the Stars of Charity Award). The publication of the video was the element that got MMM on television via the news services and breakfast television programmes. Now it was official – MMM was part of mainstream, popular culture. They were no longer a group of school kids having fun during some extra classes, but a nationwide, recognised phenomenon who worked as ambassadors of the deaf cause and Polish Sign Language in mainstream media. In 2015 MMM performed with Video during a large and popular music festival. Whenever they make a public appearance, the issues of deafness and Polish Sign Language come into the limelight with them. In addition, the YouTube comments that accompany the videos show that the aforementioned elements can reach more and more representatives of the mainstream society.

Social media has profoundly changed the media landscape; in particular, it has had a great impact on minority groups, especially the ones whose members are dispersed nationwide or globally. Social media created the chance for mainstreaming minority issues – in contrast to earlier Web 1.0 platforms that, although serving as minorities' discoursive agoras, were also likely to constitute online ghettos.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have showcased studies of Polish deaf social media initiatives that succeeded in introducing the deaf cause to the wider public and were a tool of the deaf emancipation. The powerful Facebook–YouTube cooperative is a bitter–sweet phenomenon. It comes to the communicational rescue for those internet users who prefer to interact in visual and performative sign language. However, due to algorithms intending to craft the social media content to the personal interests of their users, it creates the filter bubble which makes social networking seems more difficult than through Web 1.0 platforms.

There is still a long way to go before the Polish deaf community gains respect and is able to independently shape its own representation and social and political fate. Undoubtedly, the first steps have been taken in making extensive use of electronic media. These steps may seem irrelevant or even trivial in comparison to other deaf actions, such as the Deaf President Now! protests, but one must remember that the Polish deaf community is waking up from a very long and passive sleep. Taking over governance is a slow and painful process in which social media plays an important role as a matchless tool for communication in sign language as well as a battlefield for practising both social and citizenly behaviours.

Note

1 TubeMogul research shows that only 17% of YouTube content is created by the users themselves. The rest is the commercial content – advertising, YouTube partners and piracy – www.tubemogul.com/research/report/31 citing after: *Obiegi kultury. Społeczna cyrkulacja treści. Raport z badań*, Centrum Cyfrowe, Warszawa 2012, s. 31–32.

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